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ABSTRACT

The University of Hull (England) has a 2-year commercial French course within its language program. The first-year of the course is required of all undergraduates. Materials are largely written by faculty. All faculty have additional training in French economy and culture. Testing occurs twice a year, with four written skill areas from the French "certificat" tested in May. The actual written "certificat" is administered at the University in June; a majority of program participants take the official exam. The areas tested include general language, reading comprehension, two-way translation, and business correspondence. Oral "certificat" testing, also in June, consists of an English-to-French translation and a question-and-answer session. The more intensified second year of the course has a greatly restricted population. Each term of the second year is divided into nine sessions, one dealing with a current affairs theme. Topics are at first general, then more specific to economics and trade. Teaching team members have specific area-related responsibilities. The written and oral "diplome" tests are administered in June. All students are required to spend their third year abroad, working in industry or studying. Problems encountered include first-year motivation difficulties, a 50% success rate after the second year, and minimal followup after study abroad. (MSE)

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A Commercial French Course as Part of a University Degree

by Catherine Greensmith

Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (10th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 3-5, 1991).

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A Commercial French Course as part of a University Degree.

Hull University is a modern brick-built university situated in a middle size coastal town in the North East of England. It celebrated its diamond jubilee in 1988 and boosts a variety of subjects amongst which drama, electronic engineering and a wide range of languages. Its main catchment area covers the whole of the North of England and the Midlands, but a substantial proportion of students come from the South-East, just over twenty percent.
In most British universities a first language degree will last four years, with the third year of the curriculum spent abroad. Students who read language degrees at the University of Hull generally fall into three categories: single Special Honours, Joint Honours and European Studies.
The French Department is a constituent part of the School of European Languages and Cultures which comprises 748 undergraduates and 48 full-time members of staff, spreading over eight languages: French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Danish and Swedish.

Several departments are now offering a language degree with a commercial component, usually under the auspices of their respective Chamber of Commerce: French, German and Spanish. All initiatives are proving to be very popular with the students and these courses are being continuously developed and improved to suit the new market demands.

Established over five years ago, the commercial French course run at the University of Hull is now a fully integrated two-year programme.

In the first year, the course is compulsory for all undergraduates regardless of the type of their studies. Tuition is one hour per week for the group as a whole, approximately 175 students, followed by one hour of practical training for the Joint French and Business Studies students, for a duration of thirty weeks.

The schedule of lectures has been designed in-house according to the guidelines given in the commercial French examinations booklet supplied by the Paris Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and can be divided into three parts: in the first term, the list of topics covers banking and the Stock Exchange, taxes, insurance, commercial correspondence, secretariat as well as an introduction to the organization of French firms and a survey of the French economy. The second term deals with more practical topics and their application to everyday business life: sales, imports and exports, advertising, transports and telecommunications. The third term, which is shorter because of examination commitments in other subjects is devoted to the consolidation and revision of topics covered previously.

All the teaching material has been purpose-written by individual members of staff although students are being asked to acquire a back-up manual: Le Français Commercial, by Michel Danilo, Pierre Morel and Odile Challe, published in paperback by Presses Pocket. At the beginning of the year, all students on the course are also provided with two complete sets of past papers and encouraged to work on their own.

The teaching team is composed of five staff, two of whom are French native-speakers. All have been trained specially and regularly attend further training courses and conferences to update their knowledge of the French economy and their understanding of French society. The course is assessed by two tests throughout the year: one in February and one in May, when the four written skills of the Certificat are examined; there are a language test, a reading comprehension, translation both ways and correspondence, lasting three hours and forty-five minutes in total.

The examination itself takes place at the beginning of June, at the University of Hull which is a designated examination centre.

For the written part, the subjects are sent directly from Paris by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and the papers are returned and marked there. The oral part of the Certificat is composed of two parts of fifteen minutes each: a translation from English into French and a question and answer session.
The oral examination takes place towards the middle of June and is carried out by a team of colleagues and staff especially brought in for that purpose. The written and the oral parts both carry the same weight; the pass mark is fifty out of a hundred for each component and it is necessary to pass the written component in order to pass overall.
Although the examination itself in not compulsory, approximately two-thirds of the students enroll and the success rate is over seventy-five percent. In 1990, the pass rate for the Certificat at the University of Hull was eighty-eight percent.
The popularity of the scheme seems to be due to two main factors:

- the award of a foreign qualification after only one year at university and,
- the value attached to the Certificat by prospective employers both in Britain and in France.

Indeed, it equips the student with a sound knowledge of basic business skills, a good range of vocabulary and a useful understanding of common business practices.

During the second year, the commercial French course is restricted to a much smaller group of students, typically fifteen to twenty, and takes on a much more intensive structure.
At present, only second-year students reading French and Business Studies for a Joint Honours Degree and a limited number of third-year exchange students are following this course. Training for the Diplôme awarded by the Paris Chamber of Industry and Commerce corresponds to a far more intensive programme of three hours of tuition per week: one hour of translation, one hour of practical and oral work and one hourly lecture as well as a greater amount of preparation and self-study.
In the case of the Diplôme as in that of the Certificat, the University of Hull has designed its own syllabus following the outline given in the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris (C.C.I.P.) booklet.

Each term is divided into nine sessions, one of which deals with a current affairs theme; in the first term, the syllabus covers general topics such as a presentation of France and French-speaking countries, the family, the media, advertising and insurance; the second part of the programme concentrates on the economy, sectors and trade, and the structure of a company, its definition, organization and functions. In the third term, there is a review of the major French institutions: the state, Parliament, the tax and banking systems as well as an introduction to the European Economic Community. During the current academic year, the three current affairs themes which have been selected are: 1992, the Channel Tunnel and the reunification of Germany.

Because of the variety and wide range of topics, the selection of teaching material may cause problems. At the University of Hull, this issue has been partly solved by the compilation of course notes which are updated and supplemented every year. Students also have at their disposal their own commercial French library, within the Department, which contains reference manuals, files on particular aspects of the course such as realia or current affairs, as well as a selection of French newspapers and magazines and a number of dictionaries.

In the second year, the teaching team has specific area-related responsibilities; the translation class for instance emphasizes a different aspect of this type of exercise each term. The plenary sessions and the practical lessons are taken by the same member of staff for the duration of the whole academic year in order to ensure continuity and standardization of training. As with the preparation for the Certificat, the second-year course is assessed twice a year by a test based on the written elements of the Diplôme: an essay, the translation of a text from English into French, a commercial questionnaire, a business letter and a dictation. Additionally, the students are given set work throughout the year, usually once a week, either in translation or on a particular topic of the syllabus.

In the second year, the examination is compulsory for the Joint French and Business Studies students and optional for the exchange students. The examination fee - in the region of seventy dollars/thirty-five English pounds plus administrative costs per student - is thus covered by University central funds.

In a similar way to the Certificat, the Diplôme is taken at the University of Hull early in June for the written part and later in the month for the oral. The written papers are set and marked in Paris. For the Diplôme, the oral examination is divided into five elements and requires a wider spectrum of knowledge; there are two translation passages, a topic-based presentation, a commentary or analysis of a current affairs theme and an interview with an external examiner. Each element lasts fifteen minutes and a further fifteen minutes are allowed for preparation.

There is an equal importance attached to the written and to the oral components of the examination. The minimum required is one hundred marks out of two hundred for each. It is necessary to pass the written component in order to pass overall.

Because of the increase in the level required and the larger demands of the Diplôme, the success rate averages around fifty percent. At the University of Hull, the success rate over the past few years has been between thirty and forty percent.

Although figures may appear disappointing, the students are generally enthusiastic about the course. It allows them to develop a sharper understanding of the mechanisms of economy and commerce and enables them to master many business situations with competence; the level of commercial language they are able to acquire is equally outstanding.

All students are required to spend the third year of their studies abroad and a number of them choose to work in industry for a year. In almost all cases, the students who have followed the commercial French course have no difficulty in finding work placements and perform satisfactorily. Some of them take the opportunity of being in France to take the Diplôme again.

The administration of a specialist language course on this scale inevitably causes problems. The teaching team monitors the course at all levels on a continuous basis and a yearly review takes place in July when issues are raised, changes in methodology or assessment are made, priorities are modified in order to offer the best possible scheme to suit the largest number of students.

Perfection is more often an objective than a reality, but the students are also given the opportunity to express their views by means of a questionnaire on the various aspects of the course at the end of the second year. Finally, all queries may be aired at the staff-student committee which meets regularly during the year.

From the teacher's point of view, difficulties have been identified in three areas:

- how to keep motivation in the first year for so many students from such varied backgrounds and aspirations, and with limited facilities,
- the success rate at the end of the second year may have a negative influence both on students and staff morale, and with the financial constraints imposed on British universities, it could become a potential crisis;
- there is no successful follow-up in the fourth year when the students return from their year abroad. It seems a waste that such skills cannot be put to better use; at present, the problem is that no satisfactory alternative can be found which could combine the award of a further qualification with the demands of the preparation for an honours degree.

Thankfully however, there are numerous advantages with this course, and not least the opportunity for the students to acquire additional, practical skills in a foreign language. The benefits for their future career are without doubt, particularly in this day and age when degrees are constantly accused of failing to prepare graduates for a real life environment!

To conclude, I would like to remind colleagues that the organization of such a course demands a lot of energy, enthusiasm, time and flexibility, as well as a sizeable amount of patience; but, it can be done, it does work, successfully, and it is worth the effort. And there is help available, particularly from the Paris Chamber of Industry and Commerce, a vast organization able to assist you with staff training, examinations and teaching materials.

I am convinced that we owe our students, whatever their nationality or background the opportunity of a more specific training, better adapted to the new needs of their working environment and offer them the best possible prospects for the future.

Thank you.

Dr Catherine Greensmith
University of Hull, Great-Britain
March 1991

Approximately 18 minutes.
Please note that this presentation will be illustrated by examples of past papers thus taking up the remaining time available.